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Blogging Can Support Rich, Meaningful, and Engaged Writing

Book Insert by Ewa McGrail and Anne Davis

Our classroom blogging research project that spanned a school year examined what happens when fifth graders blog and converse about literacies in class and beyond. A class blog was created by the blogging teacher to engage students in thinking and blogging about their learning and what it meant to them. Then student blogs were launched. Student and teacher reflections and conversations, both verbally and on blogs, were employed as a tool for deeper thinking and as a learning strategy. Students were taught the following attributes of blogging: questioning, thinking, writing, collaborating, reflecting, commenting, linking, and proofreading. To push the learning connections and stretch students to higher levels of thinking comment starters were used. Examples included: "This made me think about..."; "This post is relevant because..."; "I don't understand...". Throughout, the class blog served as a model for composing thoughtful posts and comments. The current class blog post was shared at each session with the entire class to summarize and celebrate learning. Dialogue in the classroom was crucial. Understanding aspects of writing in public spaces was emphasized. There was a focused effort on nurturing a community of bloggers within and beyond the classroom.

Our initial analysis began by reviewing student writing samples in a quantitative fashion (Weber, 1990). As we looked at pre and post grade-level scores based on counts, averages, and readability indicators by the Flesch-Kincaid formulas, we found that most students improved in grade levels but these scores did not tell us much about the attributes of writing. Our next step was to conduct a qualitative content analysis (Creswell, 2003) by focusing on the following areas of writing: attitude, content, voice, connections and relationships, thinking, and craft. From this analysis three larger themes emerged. First, there was a change in attitude. Students were motivated and they looked forward to reading posts and responding to comments. There was an increase in blogger confidence reflected in enthusiasm and a willingness to take risks in thinking and writing on their blogs. They were also anxious to experiment with language and were more focused in their interactions with their readers. Second, student awareness of the audience was evident as the audience became a driving force because the students cared about, related to, and interacted with them to improve their communications. They strived to make their writing interesting, engaging, and clear for their audience. They also sought feedback, support, and ideas. These student bloggers developed strong voices as relationships strengthened. Third, there were changes in quantity and quality of writing. Sentences became longer. Students attempted to write in a more complex way. They used richer vocabulary and syntax and became more playful with blogging by using figurative language and being creative. They experimented with connected words and phrases and made an effort to explain and illustrate their ideas and thinking. This writing did not always translate into a polished product. However, they were definitely taking steps to richer, meaningful, and engaged writing. This needs to be viewed in a very positive light. If there are no attempts to take risks, there is no room for growth. These preliminary results will be corroborated with the findings from analyzing additional data sources.

References

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